

THE
SPECTRE OF NAVALISM.

BY

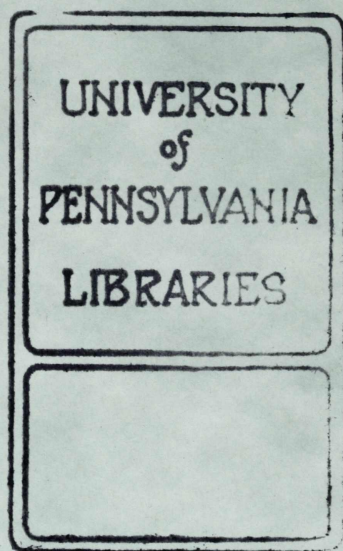
JULIAN CORBETT.



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Since Germany with her declaration of war first proclaimed herself the champion of civilisation against the menace of Pan-Slavism, German apologists have constantly shifted their ground. Seeing neutrals unconvinced, they have wandered uneasily from one alleged object to another till at last they have settled down to one that is entirely new. The world is now invited to believe that Germany plunged it into war to save it from yet another menace—the menace of British “Navalism.”

The word itself was unknown till yesterday, nor had the ideas it connotes any part in practical politics. For a full century, during which British naval supremacy had been almost undisputed, the world as a whole had quietly acquiesced in it. Abundant trial had proved it was a menace neither to freedom of trade nor to national independence. The smaller Powers indeed had learnt to esteem it as a safeguard, and so it had come to be accepted as a stable element in the international system.

So well established are all the relevant facts in recent history, that we could afford to ignore this new discovery of Germany, were it not a fresh revelation of the special danger to the quiet life of the nations, which lies beneath all that is good in the political conceptions of the Prussian school of statesmanship.

It is a conspicuous mark of that school to be for ever seeing menaces in natural phenomena which it is still too immature to understand. There is a continual starting at shadowy dangers as though they were still dominated by a survival of the restless instinct of primitive man. Living as he did in a world of vague terrors, everything beyond his ken seemed to be seeking his destruction and every stranger who did not bear his own totem sign was an enemy to be struck down. This strange survival with which Prussia has re-infected all the German peoples would matter little were it not for the political theory it breeds. It is a theory founded on the one idea of force; the belief that if a nation has power it will use it to harm its neighbours; and, therefore, all power that is not your own is a menace which force alone can remove. Hence the passion for preventive war.

The political immaturity that such a conception implies is startling in a people to whom the world has owed something at least of its progress. Its full revelation is indeed possibly the greatest surprise of this lamentable war; and yet there are Germans who recognise and deplore it. There is the Chancellor himself, who, a year before the war, wrote thus to Professor

Lamprecht of Leipzig: "The Germans are a young people with too innocent a belief in force and too little appreciation of the finer methods, and they do not yet know that force alone has never been able to maintain what force has won."

This political immaturity—we might almost say this aborted political sense—is then no invention of envious enemies; it is an element in Germanism which is recognised by German statesmen not wholly steeped in militarism, and its existence must be fully realised if we are to deal fairly and honestly with this sudden spectre of British "Navalism." For, to be just, we must recognise that this new "menace" is probably as real a thing to Prussian imagination as was the spectre of Pan-Slavism, the haunting terror, which was the real *causa causans* of this needless war. Germans at least appeal confidently to the history of the British Navy to demonstrate their case, and by that history let them be judged.

What then has history to say about it? In the first place it will tell us that "Navalism," as Germans picture it—that is, the use of naval predominance to deny the world the freedom of the seas and to tamper with national independence—has never existed. We can see it as a reflection cast from their own militarism, but otherwise we cannot see it. Prussia is afraid of her own shadow. For since the modern national system began "Navalism" has never been even attempted, except once by Spain in the 16th century. Then by naval power it was her policy to bar the oceans to all nations but herself, and it is noteworthy that it was in stubborn resistance to this "Navalism" that the modern British Navy had its birth. For it began when John Hawkins in protest against the *Oceanum Clausum* was sent to force a trade with Spanish colonists along the Spanish Main—colonists who inspired by the free spirit of the West were already groaning under the unwisdom of the Imperial policy and were glad enough to be coerced. Out of that defiant trading came the great Elizabethan war. It was fought for the freedom of the seas, and in that struggle were fixed for ever the traditions of British sea power. So it was that its earliest breath, which was to be also its abiding inspiration, was fragrant with the spirit of free intercourse and political independence which is America's greatest gift to modern civilisation.

But that was long ago. If we would test the reality of the Prussian apprehension and appraise the vitality of that first inspiration we must pass forward to the time just a hundred years ago when the conclusion of the Great War left British naval supremacy unchallenged. It is by that century of unlimited power that the matter must be tried: for the question is not how Britain won the predominance but how she has used it since it has been hers.

The climacteric year then of 1815 is the logical starting point, but to avoid suspicion of shunning the darker corners of the story let us ante-date it ten years and begin with the year of Trafalgar. That is the day when, as is now generally believed—though erroneously enough—British naval supremacy was consummated.

It was not the view of the statesmen or the admirals of that time. For them those ten years were an arduous struggle which barely prevented Napoleon from restoring what Nelson had so soundly shaken. Through all that time the great Emperor was bent on forcing the smaller Powers into a naval coalition against England and the struggle went on interminably along the whole coast of Europe from Kronstadt to the Dardanelles.

The first act of the contest was our notorious seizure of the Danish fleet. As that is the darkest blot on our naval shield so also was it the darkest hour of our effort to save Europe from Napoleon's militarism. That effort had just foundered at Tilsit. Europe and the nearer East were divided between Napoleon and the Czar. We were practically single-handed against the whole continent. We saw the Scandinavian Powers at the mercy of the new alliance. Napoleon had an army under Bernadotte upon the Danish frontier ready at his selected moment to force Denmark into his system, and it was vital to strike before him. We on our part had the means ready. It was a combined expedition which had been prepared with the object of assisting Russia to save Prussia from extinction after Jena. It was too late. Before it could be thrown into Pomerania, Tilsit paralysed its action. But it was not too late to forestall Napoleon at Copenhagen. The rapidity of the movement was exemplary, its success complete. In our hands we quickly held the keys of the Baltic and might have safely kept them. But wisely content with having gained the minimum that was essential for ourselves and Europe, we gave them back at once to Denmark. If Germany to-day could say the same of Belgium how differently would she stand in neutral regard! Still, comparatively mild as was our work, it is so repugnant to our memory, so out of tone with our naval tradition, that we have nearly forgotten all the good that came of it. Yet its results were that our fleet still sailed the Baltic, the trade continued to flow, Sweden retained her independence and the Czar found it prudent to give his half-conquered Finland peace and a constitution. Further than that the stroke enabled us to retain predominance enough at sea to save Spain, Portugal, and Sicily from the militarist yoke. That then is how Britain used her power where the shadow lies darkest on its story.

And how would Napoleon with his militarist theories of which Prussia is the heir, how would he have used such power had it been his? We know from his own lips. At St. Helena, as he looked back on the ruins of his force-founded Empire, he derided our softness in claiming so little of the spoil. Had he been the British Government in 1815, he said, he would have closed all the Eastern seas and have suffered no trade upon them but British trade. It was not so we used the power. To the last he was unable to fathom the secret of the force that had beaten him. For him, as for the purblind reflectors of his policy, the wisdom of restraint was folly. The secret he could not grasp was the secret of that tradition in which our naval power was founded and on which it continues to rest. We at least knew and still know that in the collective existence of nations there are certain

fundamentals on which no man can lay his hand and live. In the statecraft of a maritime people the most sacred of these fundamentals is the freedom of the seas. As the sun is for warmth and the rain of heaven to quicken the seed, so is the ocean a highway along which all men must be free to pass upon their business. That is an irreducible factor in sane world politics. Nothing but the raw imaginings of inexperience could regard it otherwise, and an old maritime hand would as soon tamper with it as forbid the sun to shine or the rain to fall.

It was this plain common sense, this instinct, this tradition—call it what you will—that told us, when it seemed to Napoleon we had the power to close the oceans, what to do with that power. Instead of closing the seas we threw them open to all the world, and not only that: for during the long years of our peaceful domination the British Navy was set to work charting their remotest recesses, finding new paths, and clearing them of the dangers that beset honest trade from Algiers to the furthest East. And all this was a gift to the world for which no return was asked: the fruits of the lives and treasure which the good work cost were as free to all men as to ourselves. This and no less, so far as the course of trade is concerned, was the outcome of our “Navalism” and so it will be for all time.

In the political uses to which this undisputed power was put the British sheet is no less clean. In the reorganisation of the world which followed the Napoleonic upheaval the weight of that power, as all men know, was thrown into the scales against the extreme courses of the Holy Alliance. Quick to realise that that brotherhood of reactionary monarchies intended to stifle independent national life and free institutions, we refused to allow our naval power to be used as its tool. All through the Great War we had fought for nationalism and we were true to the faith that had given us the strength to win.

The first indication of what was in the wind was the British refusal to undertake the reduction of the revolted colonies of Spain. Russia endeavoured the task, but her naval power proved unequal to it. The reactionary Governments found the British attitude difficult to understand, but there was one Power that had no such difficulty and that was the United States. In development of a suggestion thrown out by Canning, the British Foreign Minister, just after the Congress of Verona had marked the final breach between English policy and that of the Continental monarchies, America next year proclaimed the Monroe doctrine. On both sides of the Atlantic it was received with enthusiasm, and for the first time Mother and Daughter sat hand in hand in the great Council Chamber.

At that time, before America had found herself as a Great Power, there was little force to support the new doctrine except the naval power of England. But that power was behind it heart and soul till it was strong enough to stand alone. So under the inspiration of America and the shield of British naval supremacy the great group of southern republics came into being.

In that hour, so fateful for the world, America trusted

implicitly British "Navalism" at its height. And what has happened since to shake that confidence? There is no answer. And what is there to show that the old understanding is still firmly rooted in the sane political sense of the Anglo-Saxon? Let the men who know the inner history of 1898 give the reply. It is they who can judge between "Militarism" and "Navalism" in that last crisis. It is they who can say which stood for national independence and which would have struck it down.

In Europe the same policy bore similar fruit. As against the military Powers the policy of great Britain was one of non-intervention, of allowing the weaker Powers to work out their own destiny. Almost everywhere that policy rendered impotent the reactionary efforts to the larger States. Greece and Italy found themselves, and in many another State liberal institutions attained at last freedom to grow according to their lights.

Further afield the policy of this "Navalism" was the policy of the open door. The essence of that policy was to throw open the trade of the Far East to all alike, so far was the British Government from using its power to restrict any man's trade. Only in one direction was this done, and that was the Slave Trade; for the suppression of that traffic was the third plank of the policy that marked the zenith of our sea power.

Where, then, is the justification for this menace to freedom of trade by which Germany is seeking to turn attention away from the menace of her militarism? The vast trade which with admirable resource and energy she had built up in the last generation is in itself the best evidence of the unreality of the menace. But with her primitive political horizon it is this very success that is evidence of the reality of the menace. For her still half-savage instinct a commercial rival must be a foe. Her policy knows nothing between an embrace and a stab in the back, and in her aborted vision, that always sees red, international trade is only disguised hostility. She has not yet acquired the wit to make it a bond of peace and see in it a field of rich harvest.

If ever the future of Germany is to lie upon the sea, she must rid her brain of the militarist notion that the sea is territory that can be conquered. But that she cannot yet see, as it is seen by Anglo-Saxon eyes, and, indeed, by nearly all other civilised nations. Her myopia is perhaps due to the fact that she has so long been land-locked. It is the men who go down to the sea in ships and occupy their business in the great waters—these men see the wonders of the Lord; and the greatest of these wonders is the mysterious power which brings swift punishment to all who are disloyal to the free spirit of the sea.

It is because Germany did not realise in time that oversea commerce can only prosper by free intercourse that she lost the great trade which the Hansa had set up. It is because the Anglo-Saxon has this truth ingrained in his bones that his trade has withstood all assaults.

Similarly with her Empire—again and again in the roll of the centuries Germany has risen to the brink of political greatness,

but always to fall back through failure to understand that for an Empire to endure it must be felt by the rest of the world as a convenience. Let it once lose hold of this fundamental secret and sooner or later the nations will combine to remove it as a common nuisance. For this reason alone, and from no special political virtue, British naval supremacy can never become anything that approaches "Navalism." Plain common sense has always forbidden it, and always will, till the Anglo-Saxon spirit becomes Germanised and the leopard changes his spots.

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